

# Jihad Looks East: The Fallout of War in Syria on India

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India banned the extremist militant group Islamic State (IS) or (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria — ISIS), in December 2014, whereby anyone participating in or supporting, the terror group was to be prosecuted for unlawful and terrorist activities. The ban came in the light of the recent arrest of a young engineering student turned ISIS fighter, who returned to India and the subsequent detention of another young techie who was operating a popular and widely followed pro-ISIS account on the social media, Twitter, promoting its atrocities. Both the events have rattled the authorities who are now confronting the spillover of the Syria War in the Levant region, closer home in India. While intelligence and security officials failed to preempt the influence of a new terror group like ISIS in India, the announcement of Al Qaeda (AQ), the global militant Islamist organisation, establishing an India branch of its operations has further heightened the dangers of global *jihad* staring opportunistically at India.

## India in Global *Jihad*

Since its entry in the Syrian War in 2013, the ISIS has emerged as a strong force in a very short time, developing a 'badass' brand, one that can supersede AQ. The establishment of the Caliphate—a goal which Osama bin Laden or any other leader of AQ never came close to realising—has largely diminished AQ's authority as a once most powerful terror group. The blitzing success of military victories and violent *jihad* has enhanced the ISIS' appeal in the eyes of potential *jihadists*, who are currently flocking in the thousands (daily) to join its ranks. AQ, on the other hand, is working on strategies to maintain its legitimacy and

**Emergence  
of ISIS has  
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Qaeda's authority.**

outpace the ISIS which has set off a dangerous contest between the two to be the global leader in *jihad* and terrorism. One of the many fallouts of this war in Syria, that has riddled the entire West Asia and North Africa region, has resulted in AQ's decision to announce the establishment of its India branch in September 2014. As its point man in the subcontinent, it has appointed Maulana Asim Umar, an Indian Muslim and former member of the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HM) – which was banned for fighting against the Indian armed forces in Kashmir—who later joined the Taliban and AQ in Afghanistan.

There are over 150 million people in India practising Islam and a majority of them are integrated in the vibrant culture, adhering to a liberal view. The fact that India has so far been untouched by the violence of the Shia-Sunni sectarian divide which has caused turbulence in the Islamic countries, including neighbouring Pakistan, is a telling sign of the moderate Islam in India. At times, the community is also the first suspect for any terror or security incident, leading to the arrests of Muslim youths, many of whom continue to languish in prisons without convictions. These realities have undoubtedly created a pool of disgruntled Muslims becoming targets for AQ to recruit from. To appeal to, and make itself relevant amongst, Indian Muslims, AQ is adapting to the local sensibilities and depicting the Indian establishment as the Hindu oppressor (anti-Islamic). In the inaugural issue of its English mouthpiece—*Resurgence*, released in October 14—AQ focussed on the Indian subcontinent in particular and spoke of Muslims being suppressed under Hindu supremacy, the communal riots like the Gujarat pogrom and the violence in Assam. Umar chose to write about, “The Future of Muslims in India,” highlighting the Muzaffarnagar riots in which 42 Muslims (and 20 Hindus) were killed. By underscoring the suffering of Muslims and flagging domestic incidents, AQ's strategy is to incite a *jihad* against the Indian establishment. As if on a cue, already a group of 23 young men from Manipur—in the northeast region that has seen ethnic clashes against Muslims—crossed the borders to join AQ.

The relatively new group, the ISIS, on the other hand, has influenced an unknown number of Indian men through its vile propaganda, to join its ranks as Sunni fighters. Although sluggish, the steady support for the ISIS which is propping up across India, suggests that the Muslim youths in India are as vulnerable to radicalisation as the 15,000 foreign nationals from 81 countries currently fighting alongside the Islamist rebels. Indian fighters volunteering

**The trend of educated professionals joining terror groups is a worrisome factor.**

to join the ISIS has made India a potential *jihadi* risk, that has nations from Europe to Australia hitting the panic button, worrying about the threat that these radicals pose: high on religious indoctrination, loaded with combat skills and returning home to create terror.

## **Islamic State in Kashmir**

The territorial conflict in Kashmir is vulnerable to the threat posed by both the ISIS and AQ, whose strategy includes capitalising on local conflicts in failed or weak states around the world. Kashmir has a long history of violence between the state, separatists and security forces and has battled insurgency since the 1990s. It is also an attractive cause on the *jihadists'* agenda, along with Afghanistan, Bosnia, Palestine, Chechnya and other occupied Muslim lands. In the video, "The War Continues: A Statement on Kashmir's Muslims," AQ has called upon Kashmiri Muslims to emulate their "brothers" in Syria and Iraq and wage a violent *jihad* against India. The state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is India's only Muslim majority state with 66 per cent of the population professing Islam. In Kashmir Valley, which is the heart of this brewing conflict, this figure is 97 per cent. India had closely experienced the threat of global *jihad* in 1989, when, after driving back the Soviet forces from Afghanistan, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) used the foreign fighters or Mujahideen, to turn their attention to Kashmir and free it from the Hindu oppression. The ISI's Operations Branch through its two sub-divisions, Joint Intelligence Miscellaneous (JIM) and Joint Intelligence North (JIN), ran 91 recruitment and training camps, including for weapons handling and military skills, converting young ideologists into combat fighters, ready to infiltrate India's borders and carry out attacks against the Indian security forces. In addition to fighters from the bordering Afghanistan-Pakistan region, Kashmir for the first time saw fighters from Central and West Asia as well as the African countries, making the valley a hot-spot for global *jihad*. (A phenomenon of the same kind is currently underway in Iraq and Syria, with several armed militant groups recruiting foreigners into their rank and file.) The presence of foreign fighters among the militants in Kashmir went up from 15 per cent in 1994 to 40 per cent in 1998. This was also the time that the indigenous people's uprising which began against the political policies of India, turned radically Islamic, similar to the hijacking of the Syrian uprising by radical *jihadists*, including the ISIS. The phenomenon of foreign fighters ebbed with fading local support due to

increasing violent acts and diminishing finances from the ISI, but not before it made way for several terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) which have attracted Pakistani members as well as Afghan and Arab veterans. By the end of militancy in 1999, 1,379 foreign origin fighters had been killed, and they continue to be spotted, albeit sporadically, in the valley.

Today, the violence in Kashmir is low but political discontent and the causes of the insurgency itself remain unresolved. The 2010 protests which saw mass street demonstrations by Kashmiris and the deaths of over 100 civilians continue to fuel resentment against the Indian state. At such time, the threat of revival of the *jihad* cannot be taken lightly. AQ's South Asia Chief Umar and Pakistan Chief Farman Ali Shinwari, are both old Kashmir hands, with operational knowledge on militancy. While a handful of insurgents (around 80) remain active in J&K, AQ can try to organise different armed faction groups under one leadership, and launch systematic attacks against the Indian security forces. Experts and analysts on Kashmir believe that AQ's strategy of violence and sectarianism will never work in the valley. However, the security authorities are on tenterhooks after supporters waved the ISIS' black flags and scrawled graffiti on the walls in Srinagar. While there is no proven case of Kashmiri youth fighting with the ISIS, the growing support for the extremist group in the state is a worrying factor. The threat of the returning fighters, as experienced in Europe, has also raised challenges for Indian security officials who fear that the radicalisation could lead to a backlash in the low-intensity conflict in Kashmir by attracting other foreign fighters or influence others towards home-grown extremism.

## **ISIS in the Neighbourhood**

In its bid to expand its authority and inch closer to its realisation of a global Caliphate—which extends from Spain in Europe all the way up to South Asia, including India—the ISIS plans to establish control in new territories beyond Iraq and Syria. So far, terror groups in 11 countries have vowed allegiance to the ISIS. The withdrawal of the American forces from Afghanistan provides a viable opportunity to the group, similar to the one in Iraq that midwived its birth. The Af-Pak region is the birthplace of AQ and remains its stronghold from where a majority of the group's senior leadership continues to operate. Zawahiri also recently reiterated AQ's allegiance to the Taliban and its Emir Mullah Omar. This puts both the Taliban and AQ into direct confrontation with the ISIS which has called all other *jihadist* groups and Muslims to pledge their loyalty to Caliph Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. "The legality of all emirates, groups, states and organizations

becomes null by the expansion of the caliph's authority and the arrival of its troops to their areas," according to ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani. In early January, the ISIS provided a hint of this when it fought against Taliban groups and established its presence in Afghanistan's Helmand province. With a majority of the Taliban supporting AQ, the ISIS is attempting to form safe havens and gain membership amongst the existing terror factions with Wahhabi ideology in the Af-Pak region. A number of such groups— Jundallah, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and individual commanders including from the Tehrek-e-Taliban leadership in Pakistan— are now supporting the ISIS. At least 330 Pakistani terrorists are fighting with the ISIS, and Pakistan has admitted to ISIS presence within the country. Indian authorities have denied any presence of AQ or ISIS in India, however, the expanding presence of both extremists groups in the backyard and a high possibility of foreign fighters making Kashmir a target (like in the 1990s) remain a worrisome cause.

## **Indoctrination at Ground Level**

The developments and successes of militant groups like the ISIS are also likely to bolster domestic terror groups to boost terror activities in the name of religion. The Ansarut-Tawheed Fi Bilad al-Hind (Supporters of Islamic Monotheism in India), established in 2013, in the Af-Pak region, is a group largely drawn from Indian Mujahideen fighters, which was formed by Riyaz Bhatkal. A former Al Qaeda ally, the group now supports the ISIS, posting various videos with translations and subtitles in Indian languages and other *jihadi* propaganda, encouraging Indian youth to fight in the *jihad*, and has taken on the mantle of providing the best of fighters. While a large number of Muslims may not be adherents of the ISIS' violent and barbaric punishments, they could be motivated to serve the Caliphate through other means. The ISIS is in need of professional and skilled manpower like doctors, engineers, managers for oil refineries and other non-combatant roles, to run governance in its captured territory. It is offering salaries, and housing accommodation to those who make the *hijr* to the land of the pious. The West Asia region, which includes 19 Islamic countries and is at the heart of the current conflict turbulence, is also home to a 7-million-strong Indian diaspora. Many are poor and work as cheap labourers in the Gulf countries that espouse the radical Wahhabist ideology and are central in funding the extremist Sunni rebels currently in Syria. Indoctrination of these vulnerable and marginalised labourers into militant activities and possible recruitment in rebel groups motivated with financial gains plus the *jihad* cause is a possibility.

**Homegrown and standalone radicals post significant security threat.**

Similarly, there has been a growing influence of Saudi Wahhabi preachers in India. A report by the Intelligence Bureau (IB) reveals that at least 25,000 scholars preaching the conservative brand of Islam visited in 2013 and were drawing crowds as large as 12 lakh people. In the case of the Mumbai youths, their preparation for the journey to Iraq/Syria as ISIS fighters began with religious indoctrination locally at religious institutes and mosques. The Anti-Terrorist Squad has identified cells in Mumbai that are recruitment and training grounds for those who want to fight for the Caliphate. Local radicalisation mechanisms like preachers, suspected individuals and sympathisers who act as facilitators for recruitment and religious organisations, need to be monitored. At the same time, fostering trust with moderate religious heads to preach about peaceful *jihad* instead of the violent one will be crucial in preventing the radicalisation of young minds.

## **Conclusion**

National Security Advisor Ajit Doval has said the threat from AQ or ISIS is not of such magnitude that India cannot deal with. It is one thing to be certain of the strength of the security system and another to counter the growing radicalisation within India, for which the intelligence agencies suffered massively by failing to ascertain the ISIS' impact on Indian minds. For the first time, individuals with no previous history of crime, terrorism or any combat experience are travelling to join the ISIS. While in Syria, the fighters are inducted in training camps that include physical, tactical, weapons, and *Sharia* training, before sending them into battle or assigning them to specific units for more specialised training.<sup>2</sup>

India was not a part of the US-led coalition for war in Iraq or Afghanistan, hence, Indian youths don't share the same motivation as Western fighters who are driven by their anger towards the European countries or America that supported the war. It is problems at home which can drive fighters to associate the *jihad* with the sufferings of Muslims back home. The prospect of returning Indian fighters coming to establish an Islamic state in India is bleak as is the existence of domestic terror groups pledging allegiance to the ISIS, without the security authorities clamping down. What seems certain is the growing support for the ideology of both the ISIS and AQ among the populace who can act on their own without receiving commands from the group's leadership. Like in the Paris Charlie Hebdo attack, home-grown radicals can be influenced to target those who typify persecution against Muslims. Urban centres like Mumbai, and Delhi can once again be the

targets of these fighters to take revenge against the Indian establishment. It is important to understand the reasons for, and the conditions under which, these fighters are influenced to join such violent and extremist groups. Earlier cases show the lure of Islamic life in its purest form, which was a key motive for the four Mumbai youth. Unlike Iraq and Syria, India is a thriving democracy, which its people, Muslims included, are confident in. However, the 2011 Gallup poll shows that one-third (32 percent) of the country's Muslims are 'suffering' or facing hardships in their existing situations, more than any other religious group. A large number of Muslims, living in semi-urban areas or towns, find themselves with less to no work opportunities, have a low level of literacy and, therefore, are more prone to seek their identity in religious ideologies. It will be a pertinent challenge for India to ensure that the minority community does not fall prey to violent radicalisation that has sucked a large number of non-Islamic majority countries into the throes of the current war in Syria. In addition to a solid counter-terrorism strategy encompassing the fresh challenges thrown up by the ISIS and AQ, India also needs urgent policies to take the Muslim community into confidence and address the social bigotry. The answer to prevent radicalisation of Indian Muslims lies within the community and in the religious discourse. Incorporating moderate religious leaders in counter-radicalisation strategies and ensuring that the voices of liberal Muslim figures are heard loudly, can enable countering the violent *jihād* clamour. Deterring the radicalisation of Muslims in India is a key to maintaining the country's security, stability, democracy and secular character.

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## Notes

1. The government so far has reported four cases of youths from Maharashtra joining the ISIS, however, the number is larger and remains undocumented.
2. ISIS mouthpiece, *Dabiq* magazine, Issue 6, December 2014.